



AN 362 INSIDE THE KOREAN WAVE: FROM K-POP TO GLOBAL SOFT POWER
IES Abroad Multi-Location

DESCRIPTION:

This course examines South Korea's use of cultural resources as a mechanism of soft power, analyzing the production, circulation, and reception of popular culture from the 1990s to the present. Students will explore K-pop, K-dramas, films, literature, choreography, food and beauty products as case studies to understand how Korean identity is encoded by producers and interpreted by global audiences. The course also investigates mechanisms such as fandom communities, digital platform and media influencers, and considers the relationship between cultural popularity, domestic social conditions and diplomatic influence. Students will engage with theoretical frameworks including cultural essentialism, hybridity and encoding/decoding, and will complete reflection responses, workshops and a final project applying these concepts to a selected aspect of Korean soft power.

CREDITS: 3 credits

CONTACT HOURS: 45 hours

LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION: English

INSTRUCTOR: Esther Chung

PREREQUISITES: None

ADDITIONAL COST: Students are required to pay for their transportation to excursion sites. Some sessions may include guest lectures or hands-on workshops. Participation in these workshops may require an additional fee, which will be communicated in advance.

METHOD OF PRESENTATION:

Class sessions will include a combination of lectures, active group discussions, and student presentations. Where relevant, guest lecturers from South Korean cultural industries will join to provide professional insights. Assignments for the course consist of reflection responses (4 total), a midterm presentation and a final report.

REQUIRED WORK AND FORM OF ASSESSMENT:

- Participation - 10%
- Reflection responses – 40% (10% each, 4 total)
- Midterm presentation - 20%
- Final report - 30%

Course Element

Reflection responses

You are required to submit 4 reflection responses throughout the course. Each response should answer the specific prompts outlined below and engage critically with the previous week's lecture, readings or discussion—not simply summarize them. Response papers are due at the beginning of the following session, and due dates are listed in the course schedule. This is an opportunity to dialogue with the instructor, develop your analytical thinking and explore ideas that resonate with you. Each response paper should be approximately one page, single-spaced.

#1: How does your own cultural background shape the way you interpret or understand an aspect of Korean culture? Drawing on the concepts of cultural essentialism and hybridity, reflect on how you distinguish between elements you perceive as "Korean" and those that may be imagined, mediated, or co-constructed through global actors such as fans, platforms, or social media influencers. Discuss one or two Korean cultural products (e.g., K-pop, drama, reality show, webtoon, film, literature, etc.) to illustrate how meaning is negotiated between producers and audiences, including yourself.



#2: K-pop choreography encodes meanings related to style, identity, gender, global cool, and “Korean-ness” through movement, gesture, and performance. Drawing on Hall’s encoding/decoding framework and your experience at the K-pop dance studio, reflect on:

- What meanings, values, or identities do you think are encoded in K-pop choreography by producers, choreographers, and the Korean industry?
- How did you decode these meanings before the workshop, and how did your embodied participation in the choreography reshape, complicate, or challenge that decoding?
- To what extent do global dancers and fans (including yourself) reproduce, negotiate, or transform these encoded meanings through performance, cover dance, or social media circulation?

Use one K-pop song or choreography as your primary example.

#3: After examining fan-club sites, blogs, or social media communities, reflect on how meanings of K-pop are produced and transformed through fandom.

- What aspects of K-pop (values, identities, emotions, aesthetics) appear to be encoded by producers or artists?
- How do fans decode, reinterpret, or extend these meanings through fan practices such as cover dances, translations, memes, or activism?
- Do these fan practices reinforce a distinctly “Korean” identity, or do they produce a more hybrid, transnational cultural form?

Use one concrete fandom example to support your reflection.

#4: How are Korean cultural values about beauty, gender, and care for the body encoded in K-beauty products and marketing?

Drawing on the readings and in-class influencer examples, discuss how these values are decoded, reinterpreted, or transformed by global influencers and audiences. Use one Korean skincare brand or product as your main case.

Midterm assessment

Each student’s midterm exam will be in the form of an in-class presentation.

Each student will choose a reading from a list of academic articles and book chapters provided by the instructor. For some designated sessions (see schedule outline), students will deliver a presentation summarizing the contents of the reading and offering opinions/analysis. After the presentation, the student will be expected to lead a short discussion on the reading. Discussion questions should be prepared in advance and the presenter should be prepared to answer questions from the audience. Presenters should submit their presentation materials with discussion questions to the instructor two days before the class. Students are also responsible for sending the instructor the final version after the presentation if they revise the previous version. I am happy to look at the presentation in advance and also to consult with you during the process. (Presentation & discussion length: 20-30 minutes)

Final report

Students will choose one cultural genre—K-pop, dramas, films, dance, webtoons, food, beauty products or literature—and analyze how it circulates globally. Using cultural hybridity and essentialism, students will examine how Korean identity is encoded in these products and interpreted by international audiences, exploring points of alignment, divergence, or negotiation. Analysis may draw on ethnographic research, digital observation, or visual materials. Further details will be discussed during sessions 2 & 9.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Examine South Korean soft power through K-pop, dramas, films, webtoons, food, beauty products and literature.
- Analyze how Korean identity is encoded in cultural products and interpreted by global audiences.
- Apply cultural hybridity and essentialism to understand the negotiation of meaning across contexts.
- Explore circulation mechanisms like fandom, social media and digital platforms.
- Develop research, analytical, and presentation skills through reflections, workshops and a final project.

ATTENDANCE POLICY:

Following the attendance policy of IES Abroad Multi-Location, attendance is mandatory for all classes and course-related excursions. One unexcused absence is allowed without penalty. Each additional unexcused absence lowers your final course grade by one-third of a letter grade (e.g., A → A- → B+ → B, etc.). Unexcused absences include travel, oversleeping, non-emergency appointments, or failure to notify the instructor in advance. Only documented illness, family emergencies, or prior instructor-approved absences will



be excused. Arriving more than 10 minutes late or leaving early may count as an unexcused absence. Multiple late arrivals or early departures may add up to a full absence. Missed exams, presentations, or assignments cannot be made up without valid documentation. After four total absences (excused or unexcused), you will be referred to the Academic Program Manager and Center Director for review, and your home institution will be notified. Students are responsible for tracking their attendance and communicating proactively.

CONTENT:

Choose an item	Content	Assignments
Week 1 Session 1	What is soft power? Why Korea? This session introduces the module and the concept of soft power, examining how Korea's cultural appeal has evolved from the 1990s to today and why it attracts global attention.	Readings - Nye, <i>Soft Power</i>, pp.1-18 - Hong, <i>The Birth of Korean Cool</i>, Introduction & Ch.2 (15pp)
Week 1 Session 2	Cultural paradigms: essentialism vs. hybridity This session examines how cultural identity and hybridity shape the reception of Korean popular culture, encouraging students to reflect on their own interpretations of the Korean Wave. Further instructions on the final project will be shared during this session.	Readings - Huntington, <i>Clash of Civilizations</i>, Ch.2 (20pp) - Hall, <i>Cultural Identity and Diaspora</i>, pp. 392-403 - Hall, <i>Encoding/Decoding</i>, pp. 128-138 - Shim, <i>Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia</i>, pp. 25-44 <i>Reflection response #1 due</i>
Week 2 Session 1	What is the 'K' in K-Pop? This session examines whether K-pop music contains a distinct 'K' or is primarily shaped by global hybridity, focusing on sound, production and artist identity.	Readings - Lee, <i>Finding the K in K-Pop Musically</i>, pp. 51-72 - Lee, <i>From K-Pop to Z-Pop</i>, pp. 154-172 - Cho, <i>K-Pop in the History of Korean Wave</i>, pp. 23-32 In-class exercise - Students will be given time during the session to prepare and deliver a short visual presentation on a K-pop group of their choice, analysing how the group promotes Korean vs. global identities.
Week 2 Session 2	K-Pop cover dance workshop This session examines K-pop choreography as a hybrid form of Korean soft power, showing how global dance influences are localized through embodied performance.	Readings - Oh, <i>K-Pop Dance Music Video Choreography</i>, pp. 97-115 - Bora, <i>K-Pop's Hip-Hop Roots: A History Of Cultural Connection On The Dancefloor</i> K-Pop workshop - A choreography session at a K-Pop dance studio in Seoul

Choose an item	Content	Assignments
Week 3 Session 1	Soft power mechanism 1: fandom This session examines fandom as a mechanism of Korean soft power, focusing on how global K-pop fans participate in producing and circulating cultural meanings.	Readings - Jenkins, <i>Television Fans and Participatory Culture</i>, Ch.1 (focus on <i>fans and fanatics, nomadic readers, what do poachers keep</i>), p. 1–22 [Presentation] Epps-Robertson, Transcultural Fandom: BTS and ARMY, pp.208–228 [Presentation] Saeji, Embodying K-Pop Hits through Cover Dance Practices, pp. 116–136 In-class workshop [TBD] Guest lecture by social media influencer bridging fans in Latin America and K-pop groups - Ethnographic workshop: individual study of a fan-club site/blog, followed by group discussion <i>Reflection response #2 due</i>
Week 3 Session 2	K-Dramas as vessels of Korean culture? This session examines Korean soft power through K-dramas, focusing on how Korean cultural values are embedded in texts and interpreted differently by global audiences.	Readings - Lee, A ‘real’ fantasy: hybridity, Korean drama, and pop cosmopolitans, pp. 365–380 - Epstein & Green, Crash Landing on You and North Korea, pp. 1–19 [Presentation] Kaptan & Tutucu, The Rise of K-Dramas in the Middle East, pp. 196–207 [Presentation] Lyan & Levkowitz, Consuming the Other: Israeli Hallyu Case Study, pp. 212–228 <i>Reflection response #3 due</i>
Week 4 Session 1	Why does it feel familiar? Critique on class & capitalism in films & series Students will explore how Korean films and series reveal inequality and the pressures of neoliberal society, and consider why these stories resonate with audiences worldwide.	Readings - Jin, Cultural Globalization in Korean Cinema, pp. 68–90 - Lee & Proffitt, “We bet on humans; you’re our horses”: the second phase of neo-poverty in South Korea as portrayed in Squid Game, pp. 534–535 [Presentation] Jeong, Gender and Class in Parasite, pp. 79–89 [Presentation] Wagner, Parasite and Snowpiercer as Derivations to Hallyu, pp. 74–83

Choose an item	Content	Assignments
Week 4 Session 2	Soft power mechanism 2: platforms Students will explore how digital platforms circulate and transform Korean cultural products, shaping global reach, audience engagement and representations of Korean identity.	Readings • [Presentation] Ju, K-Dramas Meet Netflix, pp. 171–183 • [Presentation] Jin, Platformization of the Korean Wave: a critical perspective, pp. 408–427 • [Presentation] Jang & Song, Webtoon as a new Korean Wave in the Process of Glocalization, pp. 789–805 In-class exercise • Mapping of a Korean cultural product (webtoon, K-Pop choreography, food, etc.) and its transformations as they are adopted/adapted by users on TikTok, Fan-sites, etc.
Week 5 Session 1	Final report workshop This session is designed to equip the students for the final report. It will provide guidance on applying course theories (hybridity, essentialism, soft power) and examples of approaches and outputs, preparing students to plan and execute their analysis effectively.	
Week 5 Session 2	Eating Korea: Mukbang & reality shows on kimchi, ddukbokki, bibimbap and bulgogi This session examines Korean food media as a tool of soft power and cultural diplomacy, and the role of global mediators in shaping audience reception.	Readings • Jin, <i>Localization of cultural production in the New Korean Wave Era: a case study of reality programs</i>, pp. 1–17 • [Presentation] Yoon, <i>Precarious Eating: Young Koreans' Digital Practice of Mukbang</i>, pp. 254–263 • [Presentation] Jeong, <i>First Time in Korea? The Mediation of Strangeness through Food Practices</i>, pp. 278–288 Draft outline of final presentation due

Choose an item	Content	Assignments
Week 6 Session 1	Beauty engineered: Korean skincare and the myths of perfection This session explores how Korean cultural values are embedded in skincare and beauty products, and how K-Beauty marketing strategies, influencers and fan communities mediate and reshape these products for global audiences, highlighting the role of commercial and participatory channels in extending Korean soft power.	Readings • Elise Hu, <i>Flawless</i>, Chs. 2 & 4 • An, Gender and the Paradox of Body Politics in Korean Makeover Television, pp. 127–142 • Industry: Descriptions of Korean skincare products by Amorepacific (e.g. Innisfree, Sulwhasoo) & rising brands like Beauty of Joseon Course-related visit • [TBD] A visit to the marketing lab of a Korean skincare corporate or retailer/ or guest lecture by Korean beauty product marketing specialist
Week 6 Session 2	Cultural memory in Korean literature and its global circulation This session examines Korean literature as a form of soft power, focusing on how narratives of historical trauma and cultural memory circulate globally and generate symbolic influence through translation, diasporic authorship and international reception.	Readings • Kang, <i>Human Acts</i>, excerpts • [Presentation] Yoon, <i>Decolonizing Acts: An Analysis of Deborah Smith's English Translation, Human Acts</i>, pp. 45–58 • Lee, <i>Pachinko</i>, excerpts • Choi, <i>Flashlight</i>, excerpts • [Presentation] Park, <i>Negotiating identity and power in transnational cultural consumption</i>, pp. 120–135 Reflection response #4 due.
Week 7 Session 1	Encoding/decoding workshop This workshop introduces students to on-site ethnographic research methods, including observation and visitor interviews, while applying Hall's encoding/decoding framework to a cultural institution setting. By collecting and discussing data from the National Palace Museum of Korea, students will practice analyzing how cultural meanings are encoded by institutions and interpreted by diverse audiences.	Readings • Smith, <i>Decolonizing Methodologies</i>, Ch.2 (11pp) • Arthur, <i>A history of the world in 100 objects</i> a venture between bbc radio and the british museum, pp. 291-292 Workshop • Students will, with the guidance of instructor, visit the National Palace Museum of Korea to conduct an encoding/decoding exercise by collecting data on-site and interviewing visitors. Class will reconvene after 2-hours of on-site work for a discussion on findings.

Choose an item	Content	Assignments
Week 7 Session 2	Wither to, soft power? This session explores the relationship—and tension—between Korean cultural soft power and diplomatic outcomes, asking why attraction does not automatically produce political influence and what this reveals about the strategic use of soft power by states.	Readings • KOFICE, 2024 Overseas Hallyu Survey, Part 3 (14pp) • [Presentation] Lee, A pull factor for North Korean migration, pp. 96–108 • [Presentation] Gibson & Istad, <i>Toward a Political Model of Soft Power: An Empirical Evaluation of South Korean Foreign Policy</i>, pp.474-485 • USC Center, Backlash to the 'Korean Wave'
Week 7 Session 3	The irony of a soft power nation This session explores South Korea's societal pressures, demographic challenges and declining happiness, and examines how these realities are reflected in cultural products. Students will consider how these domestic issues are perceived by international audiences and how global reception interacts with the image of Korea projected through its soft power.	Readings • [Presentation] Jeon, <i>Her Revenge: Low Birthrate Cinema from Lady Vengeance to The Villainess</i>, pp. 84–92 • [Jandi's News Debriefing . #9] Why don't Koreans want kids anymore? K-campus • (Optional) Radio interview with Raphael Rashid, author of The Korea We Refuse to See

COURSE-RELATED TRIPS:

- K-Pop choreography workshop at a studio in Seoul
- National Palace Museum of Korea
- [TBD] Marketing lab of a Korean skincare corporate or retailer in Seoul

REQUIRED READINGS:

- An, J.-Y. (2023). *Gender and the paradox of body politics in Korean makeover television*. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *Introducing Korean popular culture* (pp. 127–142). Routledge.
- Arthur, C. (2011). *A history of the world in 100 objects: A joint venture between BBC Radio and the British Museum. Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*, 7(2), 291-292.
- Bora. (2023, September 15). *K-Pop's hip-hop roots: A history of cultural connection on the dancefloor*. GRAMMY.com. <https://www.grammy.com/news/how-are-k-pop-hip-hop-connected-history-moon-night-club-idols-videos>
- Choi, S. (2025). *Flashlight*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Cho, Y. (2023). *K-pop in the history of the Korean Wave*. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *Introducing Korean popular culture* (pp. 23–32). Routledge.
- Epps-Robertson, C. (2023). *Transcultural fandom: BTS and ARMY*. In S.-Y. Kim (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to K-Pop* (pp. 208–228). Cambridge University Press.
- Gibson, J., & Istad, F. (2025). *Toward a political model of soft power*. *Asian Survey*. Advance online publication.
- Green, C. K., & Epstein, S. J. (2020, June 5). *Crash Landing on You and North Korea: Representation and reception in the age of K-Drama*. *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 18(12), 1–19. <https://apjif.org/2020/12/epsteingreen.html>
- Hall, S. (1980). *Encoding/decoding*. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language: Working papers in cultural studies, 1972-79* (pp. 128–138). Hutchinson/Routledge.
- Hall, S. (2007). *Cultural identity and diaspora*. In S. Manning & A. Taylor (Eds.), *Transatlantic literary studies: A reader* (pp. 392–403). Edinburgh University Press.
- Hong, E. (2014). *The birth of Korean cool* (Introduction & Ch. 2). Picador.

- Hu, E. (2020). *Flawless* (Chapters 2 & 4). Penguin Random House.
- Huntington, S. P. (1996). *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (Ch. 2). Simon & Schuster.
- Jandi's News. (2024, March 7). *Why don't Koreans want kids anymore?* K-Campus. <https://kcampus.kr/news/jandi-s-news-debriefing-9-why-don-t-koreans-want-kids-anymore-3319>
- Jang, H., & Song, Y. (2020). Webtoon as a new Korean Wave in the process of glocalization. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(6), 789–805.
- Jenkins, H. (2013). *Get a life! Fans, poachers, nomads*. In *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture* (Updated 20th anniversary ed., pp. 1–22). Routledge.
- Jeon, J. J. (2023). Her revenge: Low birthrate cinema from *Lady Vengeance* to *The Villainess*. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *Introducing Korean popular culture* (pp. 84–92). Routledge.
- Jeong, J. (2023). *First time in Korea?: The mediation of strangeness through food practices*. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *Introducing Korean popular culture* (pp. 278–288). Routledge.
- Jeong, K. Y. (2021). *Gender and class in Parasite*. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *The soft power of the Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS and drama* (pp. 79–89). Routledge.
- Jin, D. Y. (2016). *Cultural globalization in Korean cinema*. In *New Korean Wave: Transnational cultural power in the age of social media* (pp. 68–90). University of Illinois Press.
- Jin, D. Y. (2025). *Localization of cultural production in the New Korean Wave era: A case study of reality programs*. *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 1–17.
- Jin, D. Y., Yoon, K., & Han, B. (2023). *Platformization of the Korean Wave: A critical perspective*. *Communication Research and Practice*, 9(4), 408–427.
- Ju, H. (2021). *K-dramas meet Netflix: New models of collaboration with the digital West*. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *The soft power of the Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS and drama* (pp. 171–183). Routledge.
- Kang, H. (2014). *Human Acts* (Excerpts). Portobello Books.
- Kaptan, Y., & Tutucu, M. (2021). *The rise of K-dramas in the Middle East: Cultural proximity and soft power*. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *The soft power of the Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS and drama* (pp. 196–207). Routledge.
- KOFICE. (2024). *2024 overseas Hallyu survey (Part 3)*. Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange.
- Lee, A. (2019). *The Korean Wave: A pull factor for North Korean migration*. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *South Korean popular culture and North Korea* (pp. 96–108). Routledge.
- Lee, J.-M. M. (2023). *Finding the K in K-Pop musically: A stylistic history*. In S.-Y. Kim (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to K-Pop* (pp. 51–72). Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, S.-R. (2023). *From K-Pop to Z-Pop: The pan-Asian production, consumption, and circulation of idols*. In S.-Y. Kim (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to K-Pop* (pp. 154–172). Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, M. (2017). *Pachinko* (Excerpts). Grand Central Publishing.
- Lee, S., & Proffitt, J. M. (2022). “We bet on humans; you’re our horses”: *The second phase of neo-poverty in South Korea as portrayed in Squid Game*. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 15(4), 534–535.
- Lee, H. (2018). A ‘real’ fantasy: Hybridity, Korean drama, and pop cosmopolitans. *Media, Culture & Society*, 40(3), 365–380.
- Lyan, I., & Levkowitz, A. (2015). *Consuming the other: Israeli Hallyu case study*. In S. Lee & A. M. Nornes (Eds.), *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the age of social media* (pp. 212–228). University of Michigan Press.
- Nye, J. S., Jr. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics* (pp. 1–18). Public Affairs.
- Oh, C. (2023). *K-Pop dance music video choreography*. In S. Kim (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to K-Pop* (pp. 97–115). Cambridge University Press.
- Park, J.-S. (2013). *Negotiating identity and power in transnational cultural consumption: Korean American youths and the Korean Wave*. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *The Korean Wave: Korean media go global* (pp. 120–135). Routledge.
- Saeji, C. T. (2023). *Embodying K-Pop hits through cover dance practices*. In S. Kim (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to K-Pop* (pp. 116–136). Cambridge University Press.
- Shim, D. (2006). Hybridity and the rise of Korean popular culture in Asia. *Media, Culture & Society*, 28(1), 25–44.
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (Ch. 2). Zed Books.
- USC Center for Public Diplomacy. (2021). *Backlash to the ‘Korean Wave’*. University of Southern California. <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/backlash-korean-wave>
- Wagner, K. B. (2023). *Parasite and Snowpiercer as derivations to Hallyu: Korean cinema, neoliberalism and semi-global exclusivity*. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *Introducing Korean popular culture* (pp. 74–83). Routledge.

- Yoon, J. (2016). Decolonizing acts: An analysis of Deborah Smith's English translation, *Human Acts*. *Translation Studies*, 9(1), 45–58.
- Yoon, K. (2023). *Precarious eating: Young Koreans' digital practice of mukbang*. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *Introducing Korean popular culture* (pp. 254–263). Routledge.

INSTRUCTOR BIOGRAPHY:

Esther Chung is a PhD candidate at King's College London's European and International Studies department. Her research focuses on South Korean soft power, with an emphasis on how transnational non-state actors convert cultural resources into diplomatic influence. She was previously a journalist at the *Korea JoongAng Daily* and *The Economist*, covering foreign policy, politics and societal issues of Korea.